THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Transitions: Dong Yuan, Lam Tung-Pang, and Lao Tongli

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SEPTEMBER 7TH, 2017

CHAMBERS FINE ART JUNE 22–SEPTEMBER 2, 2017

These days, news about China is sure to mention its "rise," "economic upheaval," or "corruption." The Chinese government now plays a large role in world politics. Urbanization has transformed the landscape, creating some of the world's most populous and polluted cities. Meanwhile, dissident government and business leaders are exiled or jailed, while others enjoy incredible wealth and privilege. For the three young Chinese artists exhibited in *Transitions* at Chambers Fine Art, this environment has been the norm their entire lives and is reflected in their work.

Dong Yuan (b. 1984) *Four Seasons*, 2015, Acrylic and water color on canvas, 23 1/2 × 59 in (60 × 150 cm)

Dong Yuan is a master doodler. She covers her canvas in strange monsters and beasts no more than a few inches tall. In *Screaming—RMB #1* and *Screaming—RMB #2* (both 2015) her mostly dark-green creatures cover a 100 renminbi note, overlaying Chairman Mao's face. The gallery says this is meant as a "critique on an 'ugly by-product' of China's fast-paced modernization." While covering currency in monsters could be iconoclastic, the cartoonishness of the creatures and the muddled portrait of Mao himself blunt the impact. However, Dong's work shines on a grander scale. *Four Seasons* (2015), a 231/2 by 59 inch painting, depicts a similar mob of creatures, but in a more muted, varied palette. This gives the painting an ancient feel, and its endearingly creepy content evokes

Hieronymus Bosch. Socio-political commentary is absent or unapparent, but the complexity and detail of the painting captivate.

Meanwhile, Lam Tung-pang's pieces strike a more somber chord. In his room are two large reproductions of Hong Kong paper currency: the green version issued during the British Colonial era (1945–97) and pink bills from the present day. Each print is about the size of a door and looks like it has been worn down near the point of crumbling. When Hong Kong was transferred to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the agreement stipulated that the island's "capitalist system and way of life" would remain unchanged for fifty years. However, Beijing has continuously increased its influence there and taken greater control of its media and political systems. Together, Lam's notes mirror these changes: Britain's influence has faded, but so has the autonomy that followed.

Hanging between the currency prints are four long pieces of paper that Lam covered with charcoal lines and then erased during a performance at the Tate Modern in 2010. Its title, *Selling My Soul*, is framed along with four of the erasers, which have Lam's image printed on them. Each is shorter than the last. The piece, according to the gallery, is meant to represent the all-consuming nature of art. The concept is clever, though the work is not particularly moving, at least in static form. Placed between the bank notes, it seems less about art and perhaps more about the shrinking of the individual into human capital as China's economy grows.

While Dong and Lam engage with China's unruly change in direct, external ways, Lao Tongli does so by withdrawing inward. His large ink paintings feature intricate, brightly colored lines that look like trees or arteries. *Desire of Libido • Above the Horizon No. 08* (2017) appears like a dreamscape of plastic trees, floating through clouds at dusk or dawn. Lao began the series as a way to cope with his father's struggle with heart disease, and it soon became an intensive spiritual practice for him. The varied thickness of the lines coupled with the hazy background give the painting a strong sense of depth and pull the viewer's gaze into it. Thus present, their past and future converge into a dangerous, worthy moment.

These three artists respond uniquely to the challenges of living in China. Together, Dong's anger, Lam's denial, and Lao's acceptance form a narrative of the emotions one feels in response to trauma. The cycle repeats, characters change roles, but art remains.